DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 161 079 CS 204 474

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TITLE A Short History of Sentence Combining: Its Limitations and Use.
INSTITUTION Arizona State Univ., Tempe.
SPONS AGENCY National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, Ill. Research Foundation.
PUB DATE [77]
NOTE 17p.; For related documents, see CS004443 and CS204472-475

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Composition Skills (Literary); *Language Research; *Literature Reviews; *Reading Achievement; *Sentence Combining; *Sentence Structure; Teaching Techniques

ABSTRACT

This document traces the history of sentence combining, from Ney's study in 1966 and Mellon's study in 1969 to recent research conducted by Ney and supported by the Research Foundation of the National Council of Teachers of English. Studies by O'Hare (1973), Ney (1975), Combs (1975), Perron (1974), Green (1972), Hunt and O'Donnell (1969), Miller and Ney (1968), and Vitale and others (1971) have found that instruction in sentence combining did have a positive effect on students' ability to write sentences of the kind practiced. Studies by Stedman (1971), Thomas (1975), and Hughes (1975) have found that sentence combining significantly helps students to read, while Combs (1975) and Ney (1976) have not been able to find an improvement in reading on the part of their experimental groups. Differences of method in sentence combining research include use of signaled rather than free sentence combining exercises, variation in the number of sentences to be combined, and addition of oral exercises to the written exercises. Ney has also experimented with game techniques joined with sentence combining (1976) in a study in which the experimental group did not show significant gains over the control group. It is the belief of the researcher that sentence combining should be an important part of the elementary school curriculum for short periods of time daily while the value of sentence combining instruction at the college level has not yet been determined. (MKM)

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A Short History of Sentence Combining: Its Limitations and Use[1]

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Warren Combs in his dissertation (1975:19) states: "Ney (1966) and Raub (1966) were the first studies that tested the effect of practice in SC on writing ability." From his survey of the literature, Combs was right enough to be quoted. He neglected only one thing; it takes longer to have a journal article published than it does to have a thesis bound and deposited in a library.

In the summer of 1965, I found myself at an NDEA institute headed by Wm. Griffin at George Peabody College in Nashville. With only two lectures per week to give and one class per day to teach, I made arrangements with the demonstration school to try some techniques for the enhancement of the writing skills of seventh graders. Since according to A. H. Marckwardt formal written English is a foreign

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language to most of the students in the schools (1964:208), it occurred to me that as a basis for improvement of writing skills, foreign language teaching methods should be used to help students in the writing process. This led to the use of such devices with moderately encouraging results. Whether or not this led to Mellon's study which also provided the generic name for the exercises may never be known. But this much is known: there is reference to the Ney (1966) study in the Mellon monograph (1969:74). (Mellon has since questioned the validity of sentence combining exercises on theoretical grounds (1972).)

O'Hare then took the Mellon methodology, refined it and discovered more clearcut results in favor of the experimental methodology. Not only did O'Hare find that students who practiced sentence combining used a greater number of the sentence types practiced, he found that the overall writing ability of students improved as measured by impressionistic ratings of teachers on a matched pair test (1973:64). These findings have been corroborated by Ney (1975:18-20), although Francis Christensen condemned the whole idea of sentence combining by arguing that such practice would cause students to write artificially complex sentences making for stilted prose (1968:576). The Christensen argument is probably invalid for two reasons: (1) Sentence combining exercises do not make wholesale changes in the linguistic competence of young native speakers, but rather aid them in developing skills for the manipulation of language. (This point has been argued rather extensively by Ney (1974).) (2) In making his point, Christensen

apparently was caught in a false dilemma. That this is so can be demonstrated by the statement of the dilemma in a slightly different form: Let us say that there are two students in a fourth grade class. One student writes in simple sentences and compound sentences joined by and interminably and another student who has a stylistically more sophisticated prose writes with relative and adverbial clauses. Which of the two students would be judged the better writer by the teacher? The answer of course is the second student who writes with some variation in sentence type. (O'Hare insists that the "knowing how" helps the student in "knowing what" to write by liberating the student from syntactic roadblocks (1973:72).) This restatement of the dilemma implicitly used by Christensen should be sufficient to illustrate the falsity of the argument. But if it is not, Combs has attacked the argument from experimental evidence (1975:18) and I can offer anecdotal evidence to show its falsity. In working with students from grades two through seven and with college freshmen, only one out of more than one hundred and fifty students has missed the point and fulfilled Christensen's prophecy. This student seemed to feel that since the class had concentrated heavily on combining sentences into relative clauses, he was supposed to fill his free composition with relative clauses. But the point should be clear, the linguistic competence of young native speakers is of such a nature that they do not as a rule produce convoluted prose even after practicing extremely complex and rare sentence structures.

In any case, since the O'Hare study a number of important

experimental studies have been performed. Combs has shown that even though there is some decay in the skills acquired through sentence combining practice, yet after ten and eighteen weeks the experimental students are still ahead of the control students (1975). Perron (1974:168) has demonstrated that not only does sentence combining increase the syntactic maturity of the prose of young writers but that "sentence combining seems to be self-motivating in a way that other attempts to teach writing have not been." In other words, students enjoy sentence combining and continue doing their work when external restraints are removed. Green (1972) found that sentence combining gains were largely made in the narrative mode. Hunt and O'Donnell (1969) found that sentence combining did help promote the syntactic fluency of fourth graders much as the earlier study by Miller and Ney (1968). Vitale and others (1971) in laboratory conditions found that instruction in sentence combining did in fact have a desirable effect on the students' ability to write sentences of the kind practiced.

Stedman (1971) has found that sentence combining significantly helps Afro-American students to read. That this is so should not be surprising since miscue analysis indicates that students who have better control of the grammar of English also comprehend written English in reading better. (See Thomas (1975:107, 136) for support of this.) For this reason it is strange that Combs (1975) was not able to find an improvement in reading on the part of his experimental group. This might be due to the fact that the Gates-MacGinite test

is not constructed in such a way that it picks up subtle changes in reading behavior that occur over a short period of time or that the "special reading measure" was little better since the results were "confusing, and yet encouraging" (1975:85). Hughes (1975) using a Goodman miscue analysis as a measuring device did find improvement in one group of children in one school. But, in research supported by the Research Foundation of the National Council Teachers of English, I have not been able to establish a clear cut advantage in reading for fifth grade students who practiced sentence combining for the fall semester of 1976. Part of the problem lies in the development of a suitable measure. In the last named study, an attempt was made to develop a score based on miscues per hundred words with weightings for the use of regressions for correction and with weightings for the quality of miscues. This attempt appears to have failed.

In the sentence combining research to date, there have been consistent differences. Work done by this researcher and associates has always used signalled rather than free sentence combining exercises. The work by Mellon, O'Hare and the text by Strong (1973) have always permitted more than one right answer. The work by this observer has always required students to combine sentences in such a way that there is only one correct form for the combined sentences. Furthermore, work by this observer limited the depth of embedding (the number of sentences to be combined) to four at the most; other works required many more embeddings. So also, up until the study in the fall of 1976, this researcher always had students performing oral as well as

written exercises in sentence combining and always had students read literary works to provide the context for exercises in sentence combining. The reason for the last of these strategies is simple: Language for sentence combining exercises must come from some source. Too often it comes from the experimenter's past experiences. It may as well be drawn from literary works which then provide interest for the student and a context for the exercises--language only means in context.

In any case, in the fall 1976 project, two groups of students were employed using a rotated teacher design for the entire semester in an effort to nullify the teacher variable and/or the Hawthorne effect. One group (the individualized group) read the selection silently and then performed the sentence combining exercises together with comprehension questions on an individual basis. Exercises were constructed in the following fashion:

> Join the sentences below in the same way that the example sentences have been joined.
>
> Example: Ichabod had a voice. The voice was loud. The voice was harsh.
>
> Ichabod had a loud and harsh voice

1. He taught his students to sing. His students were young. His students were bright.

* * * * * * * * * * * *

(Context for the language exercises was provided with a simplified version of the Legend of Sleepy Hollow.) Members of the other group (the oral group) followed the regimen for the preceding experiments by this researcher: (1) They orally read the story for the project prior to any work on sentence combining, (2) they combined the sentences for each exercise orally, and then (3) the experimenter read two or three sets of sentences thus practiced and had the students write the combined versions of the sentences thus read.

Strangely enough, in a comparison of pretest with posttest scores, the significant gains appeared largely in the scores of the oral group class on the first posttest administered at the conclusion of the classes. They are as follows: (Table I)

Insert Table I about here

Here it is apparent that only in the adverb initial clause, a mark of an immature style according to Hunt (1965: 82), do the members of the individualized class perform at a better rate than the members of the oral group class. The question not answered by this experiment, however, is whether the oral component of the oral group class caused the better performance or whether it was the individualization which did not work so well for sentence combining. Since other research projects have done quite well without an oral component in sentence combining, it would seem to this observer that the individualized learning style was not as effective as the group work. There is one

other explanation, however.

This researcher has often asked the question: Is there a better way to induce students to write more mature prose style than by using sentence combining exercises? If there is an answer to the question, it would seem to lie in the area of game techniques. As a result, a sentence combining project was started in the fourth grade of Evans school in the spring of 1976. This project followed for one semester, the customary sentence combining exercises as in previous Ney experiments (1968, 1967 et al.) with one exception: a language game was played during the last ten of every thirty minute sentence combining segment. This language game was rather like the one designated as "Sentence Partners" by Perron (1973:269). Two sentences with a shared noun phrase were written on the blackboard with the subjects and predicates separated. Each subject or predicate was then numbered:

1	2	3	4
The boy	felt sick.	The boy	was eating purple prunes.

Students were then designated by number to represent each section of the sentence(s). A fifth student was then invited to sign in and represent any connecting word that he/she wished to be. If he/she wanted to bring a friend or two to represent different words or rearrange any of the original four, that also was permissible. Students were then asked to read the sentences created. Thus a girl, Judy, might sign in as <u>because</u> with her friend, Gail, as <u>he</u> and then rearrange the students already at the front of the class to produce the sentence:

Judy Gail 4 1 2

Because he was eating purple prunes, the boy felt sick.

During the course of the semester the game became ritualized through constant use, but the students generally showed a good deal of interest in competing for the honor of creating a sentence. Nevertheless, for the first time in many semesters of work with sentence combining, the experimental group did not show statistically significant gains over the control group. Why such a result should occur is beyond explanation to this researcher. It, however, indicates that much is yet to be learned about the effects of sentence combining on writing ability and the interaction of sentence combining with other activities.

In any case, attempts have been made to apply sentence combining to the problem of teaching written composition to freshman students on the university level. I have myself done two projects with freshman students, both of which failed completely to pick up anything except negative increments in scores used to measure growth in writing skill. Attitudinal surveys showed that student attitude towards sentence combining was extremely bad (Ney, 1976). Daiker, Kerek and Morenberg (personal correspondence) are completing a huge sentence combining project funded by the Exxon foundation involving 300 students at Miami University (Oxford, Ohio). Their experimental groups are fed a diet consisting almost wholly of sentence combining and their initial results look promising. However, even if their experimental evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of the use of

sentence combining as the main segment for a freshman course, it is unlikely that this researcher would follow their lead in making sentence combining the mainstay of a freshman course. In the first place, I doubt that students can be held to the task of sentence combining for long periods without some deleterious side effects, and in the second place, there are other things besides sentence combining that should be covered in such a course.

It is thus the belief of this researcher that sentence combining should be an important part of the elementary school curriculum, but I personally would never hold students in grades three through six to sentence combining for more than thirty minutes at a time--twenty may even be the maximum--and never more than five or six times per week. I am extremely skeptical about its efficacy when used with students beyond the eighth grade although I agree with Stotsky (1975:59) that "It is reasonable to assume that the child who understands how to compose a highly complex sentence also understands that sentence. It is therefore possible to construe the sentence-combining exercises as one highly structured kind of writing activity which singularly constrains the child's attention to the mastery of complex grammatical structures and, in so doing, may facilitate growth as well."

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Table I: Significant Differencess of Scores of Individualized Group Compared with Oral Group

	Means		Standard Deviations		F-Ratio	Prob.
Number of Words	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest		
Individualized	55.857	56.429	16.856	44.157	14.904	.001
Oral Group	52.056	106.333	22.462	30.108		
Number of Multi-Clause T-Units						
Individualized	1.643	1.357	1.151	1.447	6.618	.015
Oral Group	.944	2.667	1.056	1.414		
Infinitival Complements						
Individualized	.500	1.214	.760	.975	7.229	.011
Oral Group	.278	2.667	.575	1.847		
Adverb Clause Initial						
Individualized	.071	.286	.267	.469	6.732	.014
Oral Group	.056	.000	.236	.000		
Adverb Clause Final						
Individualized	.571	.714	.938	1.490	6.015	.019
Oral Group	.556	2.111	.922	1.676		

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[1]Some of the research in this report was performed under a grant from the Research Foundation of the National Council of Teachers of English.